

Giant

by NotTasha

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Summary: Ezra ends up with a bunch of bullies and a baby. Vin and Buck try to get him out of the bad situation.

1. Giant - Section 1

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>RATING: PG for Language
MAJOR CHARACTERS: Ezra, and also Buck and Vin

>SUMMARY: Ezra is kidnapped and ends up with a baby and a bunch of bullies
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****Giant****

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><p>Ezra was feeling rather pleased with himself as he rode through the open country, returning from an excellent shopping excursion. He turned to see the carefully packed parcels behind his saddle and could hardly wait to get back to Four Corners. One jacket in particular was calling to him, but he knew it was not to be worn on the trail, the color was too delicate and the fabric too fine to withstand the dust and abuse.<p>

It was difficult to keep clothing clean and in good repair considering his present responsibilities. It seemed that most of the money he won at the tables these days went into replacing his constantly depleting wardrobe or paying off his laundrywoman.

A sound stopped him and his horse moved uneasily. Ezra strained his ears as the sound repeated. Off to the east, he could just barely see

a Conestoga wagon, sitting still and alone. He exhaled slowly. As he waited. There should be some activity. He waited, wanting to see something, but all was still " unnaturally still.

There was just that sound " that horrible repeating cry.

He had a bad feeling about this as he turned Chaucer toward the wagon.

As he approached the site, the sound became more distinct, an animal in pain. The closer he was, the more plaintive the cry became.

He slowed suddenly as the scene came into plain view. Something horrible had happened here. The sight was difficult to see. He dismounted and moved to the body of a man, lying on his back, several yards from the wagon. He'd been shot through the head, his arms lying beside him, palms up. His face, astonished. A revolver lay nearby.

A woman was curled up beside the wagon, turned toward the spoke-wheel. The ground beneath her stained red with blood. Both were quite clearly dead.

_Damn! _

Ezra sat back, pulling off his hat and slowly running a hand through his hair. _A waste. Such a horrible waste._

__He sighed and slowly straightened. There was nothing he could do. Whatever happened here, he was too late offer any help. _Damn._

The horse cried out again, and Ezra moved quickly, rounding the wagon to check the animals.

His heart sank at the sight that greeted him. A team of horse: one dead in its traces; another, a sorrel - its eyes wide with pain. It lunged, trying to stand, and fell back to its place. Ezra watched the frantic movements for a moment, before he moved closer.

Its leg was broken. The poor thing would never stand again.

Quietly he rested one hand on the animal, trying to calm it, but it would not be eased. Slowly, he moved his hand until he caught its bridle to still its head. Then, with a smooth movement, he un-holstered his Remington, and brought it to the animal's head. Then, he spoke a soft, "Hush now. It will be over soon." And mercifully put the sorrel out of its misery.

He stepped back, drawing in a deep and frustrated breath as he replaced his weapon. Then, almost in answer to the shot, a wail arose.

Ezra sucked in his breath in shock, thinking for a moment that the sound had come from the horse. He blinked a moment or two before realizing that the sound came from behind him.

He turned, squinting at the wagon, before he started moving again, taking cautious steps toward the back of the vehicle.

What was it? A cat maybe?

He pressed open the flap at the rear of the wagon and gazed inside. The interior was tightly packed, with a narrow passage that led to the front. The couple was obviously moving somewhere.

The gambler pulled himself up and started moving to the eerie cry. Finally he paused at a box, at the front of the wagon. Yes, it was definitely coming from this place.

Carefully, he undid the latch, and pulled back the lid, preparing himself for whatever might be contained. He was surprised as he looked into the face of a cubby pink baby.

The cries stopped the moment the lid was lifted and the child's brown eyes looked up at him expectantly. The baby was about a year old, and seemed fascinated by the face that looked down on him.

"Oh, you poor darlin'," Ezra sighed, and reached in to put his hands around the child. He lifted the baby from his confines, realizing that the parents must have hidden the poor thing here before the attack.

He sighed, realizing that they had placed the babe in this box, just hoping that someone might come across the wagon just as he had. How could they have known? And to think, some stray gambler had come across the site in time to provide a rescue. It was incredible.

There was an obvious reek coming from the child. _Oh,_ he thought, holding the little stinker away from himself, _this must be remedied immediately!_

He looked about and found a stack of cloths that were most likely meant to be diapers.

"Do not worry, little one," Ezra said softly. "Soon, you will be much more comfortable, and I will be in much less danger of incurring an even worse laundry bill this week." He settled the babe on its back on one of the boxes, and removed the pilch. In a moment, he unpinned a rather foul diaper from the child.

"Ah, you are a young man, I see, and you've been rather busy," Ezra muttered as he did his best to not breathe.

The boy smiled at him as Ezra winced at the unpleasantness as he took away the old diaper. Really, he was not made for this sort of activity. Still, with a certain amount of professionalism, the gambler cleaned the pitiable child as best he could, and replaced the offending article with a clean one.

As he worked, he was drawn back to an old memory, of a year that he had spent with his Uncle James Phelps. Phelps' wife had died in childbirth and the man had taken on his 12-year-old nephew to help with his three small children. When Ezra arrived at the household their ages ranged from four to newborn. The youngest child, Jesse, was about the age of this boy when Phelps remarried and sent Ezra packing again.

Funny, Ezra had forgotten how much he missed his cousins. He'd been treated little better than a servant in that household, acting as nanny and bottle washer to the children, but he'd quickly come to

love them. They were quick and clever little things that seemed to become attached to him over time.

Ezra found a small cup and a water jug and filled it for the child. The baby sat up and heartily gulped down on the water offered to him. Ezra figured that the child had not been alone for too long, all morning perhaps, but not long enough to cause any harm. Hopefully the child had napped throughout most of his confinement.

After he finished the cup, the boy tugged himself to his feet, using Ezra's arm for support. He tottered uneasily for a moment and then plopped back down on his bottom.

Ezra searched through the wagon until he found a small cache of food. He made the child a jam sandwich and tore it into pieces that the boy readily ate. Ezra had to smile at the jam covered face of the small boy. And the kid didn't even seem to mind the cleaning that followed.

The boy grinned when he was done and said, "Dah!"

"No young sir, I'm not your father," Ezra said, and he remembered the bodies outside. "I'm sorry. I wish the news was better. You need not worry about your future. I'll bring you with me to Four Corners, and we'll see about finding your relatives. Mr. Dunne is quite astute and tracking down all manner of folk with well-worded telegrams. Soon, you will be returned to a home."

"We'll have Nathan look you over, but I'm sure he'll find nothing amiss." Ezra smiled a little. The child certainly looked healthy. "I'm certain Mr. Larabee might enjoy a little fellow in town. He might seem frightening, but the man is easily taken by one so small. And Mr. Wilmington is such a child at heart, he would adore having you to play with. And Vin and Josiah as well. Lord, you will have playmates without end."

The boy grabbed onto Ezra's fingers and tried to stand again. At that moment, a crunch resounded behind him. Ezra spun about in the small wagon. Two faces peered in at him through the open back of the Conestoga.

"Well, look what we have here," one of the said intruders said, pointing the barrel of his gun at Ezra's head. They were big men - one in brown and one in gray, with stringy black hair and the same sort of beaky nose. They had to be brothers.

"Look at this fancy lookin' thing," the other brother spoke, keeping his weapon on Ezra as well.

"No funny moves now," an incredibly deep voice came from the front of the wagon. Ezra turned to find another man looking in at him. The man in front was, if possible, even larger than the two in back, possibly the largest man Ezra had ever seen. His figure filled the whole front of the wagon. "Get out of there and bring the kid wit' ya."

Ezra looked down at the boy before him and wondered what he could do. There were at least three of them, possibly more, all of their guns were trained on him. He decided to play it as safe as possible as he picked up the boy and headed to the back of the wagon.

One of the men tried to strip the child from his hands as Ezra emerged, but Ezra held on tightly, growling, "You'll not harm this child!"

The man in gray laughed, and hauled Ezra, child and all, to the ground. The baby looked around at the newcomers and clung tightly to Ezra's jacket.

Ezra backed around the side of the wagon, trying to angle the child's line of vision away from the bodies on the ground, trying to get some distance between them.

The man from the front of the wagon rounded to where Ezra was standing. "So, there ****_was_**** a kid. I guess Penn was right." Ezra felt absolutely dwarfed by the men. He was a full head shorter than the brothers, and the largest must have stood seven feet tall. He was used to being around the others of his group, many of them overly tall, but this was ridiculous.

"Hand it over."

"I shall not give up this child," Ezra said evenly, holding tightly to the boy.

"Danny, Marty, this little man thinks he's something, doesn't he?" The largest of the three said.

"What are you gonna do, little man, fight us for him?" Marty said, leaning his weight on Ezra's shoulder.

Ezra tried to sidestep him, but Danny held him in place. He would be crushed if he wasn't careful.

"What do ya think o' that, Geno?" Danny said, "We got ourselves a fightin' rooster here, a bantam cock maybe."

"Just grab the kid, Danny," Geno said, "I'll rip this fancy little thing apart."

Ezra had to think fast. "And what, pray tell do you plan to do with the child once you have him?" he asked smoothly.

Danny smiled. "We're gonna make a ton a money offa that kid. Penn says that his grand-daddy would be willin' to pay a tidy sum for him, seein' as how he's already lost his son." The man grinned at the body of the dead man.

"And where will you be taking him?" Ezra asked. The child had buried his head against Ezra's neck and had his hands firmly attached to his jacket's lapels.

"Evansville," Danny blurted out.

Geno threw him a nasty look and ordered, "Shut up, Danny."

Danny smirked. "He's gonna be dead in a minute, Geno."

"Really? Are you so sure that is a wise idea?" Ezra asked, looking skeptical. "It's a two day ride to Evansville, possibly three days. Who, if any of you, is capable of caring for a baby for that length

of time?"

The three men looked at each other.

Ezra continued hopefully, "A child at this age is capable of contracting a plethora of diseases along the trail: cholera, diphtheria, typhoid, mumps, measles, whooping cough, scarlet fever, chicken pox, malaria." He wondered if he was pressing it too far. "He'll need constant observation and care to ensure that he remains alive and well." He looked from man to man. "He'll require special feeding and someone will need to change his diaper... regularly. Are any of you capable of performing this task?"

Geno grinned. "And you think you'd be the guy to do that?"

"I'll agree to travel with you to Evansville and care for the child," Ezra said, knowing that this could save his life and perhaps the life of the child as well.

The three men laughed. "Okay, sure little man," Geno agreed. "Looks like we got ourselves a nursemaid in this bargain. Let's get out of here."

Ezra kept his face impassive. "Let me collect the items we will be needing."

Geno grabbed Ezra by the arm and the child was suddenly wrenched from him. For a moment Ezra thought he had lost. Danny held the child at arm's length while Marty came at the gambler. The man roughly searched him and came up with the Remington and the Colt Richards Conversion, but not the derringer.

A glint came into Ezra's eyes. Three men, one derringer, Ezra thought - two bullets. All things considered the odds didn't seem too badly stacked against him. He'd been up against worst before, but there was the child to think of as well. He would have to wait for the right occasion to take action.

When Marty went through the gambler's pockets he came up with a deck of cards. "Looky here," Marty crowed. "We got ourselves a game tonight."

Ezra's hope of winning his way out of this mess were dashed when Geno grabbed the deck and flung it into the wagon. "I'm not gonna to put up with the two of you in a card game," Geno growled menacingly. He finally released Ezra's arm, and instead grabbed him by his shirtfront and lifted him fully off the ground before shoving him toward the wagon. "No funny moves," he said for a second time.

Funny moves? Ezra thought as he climbed back into the wagon. There's nothing funny about this. He gathered up the pile of clean diapers. There weren't many of them. He'd probably need to bring the soiled one as well. He carefully put into an oilskin sack that, by the smell of it, had been brought for that purpose. He picked up the pilches, the cup and whatever else he could find related to the child. There was a small toy dog and some clothing, cleaning cloths, a bowl and a little spoon. He found a partial bag of powdered milk, bread, jam, a few fresh vegetables and canned fruit. Not much, all things considered. He piled the items at the back of the wagon. He

then found a small saucepan, large pot and a bar of lye soap and put that with the rest.

Marty had removed the saddlebags from Ezra's horse and was in the process of dumping them under the wagon, along with those parcels that had seemed so important a few minutes ago.

Marty then went through the things Ezra had just gathered from the wagon and stuffed most of them into the emptied saddlebags.

Ezra's eyes fell upon a small framed picture that was near the front of the wagon. He picked it up and stared at it for a moment. It was a photograph of the boy and his parents, taken recently. The dead man looked so happy in the image, staring confidently at the camera, a western hat pushed back on his head. The woman gazed lovingly down at the boy in her arms. She was pretty and small, and her hair was perfectly set. Ezra took the photo with him as he climbed out of the wagon.

He took a moment to ensure that the boy was still unharmed in Danny's hands and then went to the body of the boy's father. He heard Geno cock his gun as Ezra leaned down and went through the man's vest, finding a silver pocket watch. It was engraved with the name 'Jack G. Benedict.'

"I'm truly sorry about what has befallen you and your family, Mr. Benedict," Ezra whispered to the dead man, "But I promise I'll do my best for your child."

He then moved to the man's wife. She was curled in a tight ball, her back to the gambler. He touched her head softly and pulled a finely carved tortoise-shell comb from her hair, and then smoothed the hair back into place. He looked at the three small items in his hands, knowing that these may be the only things the boy would have to remember his parents by. Then, he reached into his pocket and drew out a silk handkerchief to tie them tightly into a package. He slipped them into his pocket and went back to retrieve the boy.

Danny returned the boy willingly, apparently glad to be rid of the responsibility. Ezra saw that Marty had returned the now refilled saddlebags to his horse, and strapped the large pot behind the saddle.

"Are you ready to go, nursesey?" Marty asked as Ezra approached him.

Holding the boy with his one arm, Ezra swung himself into the saddle and glared down at Marty.

Marty quickly bound Ezra's free hand to the pommel. "I've got my eye on you, nursesey," he said. He then tied Chaucer's reins to his horse.

The group started off toward the east at a quick pace. Ezra looked down at the boy in his arm and sighed, "Well, my young man, it seems like we're in for an adventure."

"Hey, Mr. Larabee," Cal Stoker called as he sauntered over toward the lawmen. "I'm glad I ran into you."

Chris, Buck and Vin had just entered the saloon that afternoon when Stoker addressed them. "What is it I can do for you?" Chris asked.

Stoker jammed his hands into his pockets. "It's probably nothin' but I've been thinking on it all day. Been bothering me."

"Yeah, what's that, Cal?" Buck asked.

"I was about a mile north of Prosper's place, about three hours outta town, when I seen this wagon goin' by at a pretty good clip." Stoker shrugged. "Seemed that they was in an awful hurry. Too much so, you know. I looked back after a while and saw a group of guys going in the same direction on horseback. They was in a hurry too."

"A group of guys?" Vin inquired.

"Three big fellas," Stoker said. "It's been kinda gnawing at me all day. I just have been thinking sometin' was wrong with that."

Chris considered what Stoker had said for a moment. It could be nothing at all, but then again... He looked to Vin and Buck. "You wanna go and check it out?"

Buck shrugged. "Sure, I 'spect we could head out there. We'll go see if anything is wrong."

Vin nodded and the two men headed to the livery.

"Keep an eye open for Ezra," Chris added. "He should be passing through that way. Make him lend you a hand."

The two men laughed, knowing how difficult it was to _'make'_ Ezra do anything.

"It's probably nothin'," Stoker said. Chris watched his two men go, hoping that Stoker was right about that.

They had been riding hard for several hours when the child started to cry. "We'll need to stop," Ezra stated.

The men turned in their saddles, staring at the gambler. Geno said, "We stop when I say stop."

"We stop when demanded by the child," Ezra stated with as much authority as he could muster. "He's hungry and requires his diaper to be changed. If we continue as we are, he'll become ill and you'll be unable to use him in exchange for ransom." Ezra truly hoped that none of these men had any experience with children, didn't realize that children were far more resilient than he let on. As long as Ezra could hold this sort of threat over their heads, he might have a chance of getting things to go his way.

Geno signaled to the men, and the horses drew to a stop. Ezra waited until Marty untied him and then he stiffly swung himself off of his horse, with the boy in his arm. He gave his horse a reassuring pat before he removed the saddlebags, and slung them over his other shoulder. After he found a place to set down the boy, he rubbed his sore arms for a moment. The ropes had torn his right wrist. He knew

that with his right arm secured, he would not be able to get at his sleeve gun if the opportunity presented itself. He would have to get them to switch sides.

Ezra took care of the child as best he could, changing his diaper, feeding him some of the food and giving him all the water he wanted to drink. The child, whom Ezra had begun to think of as Jack, after the boy's father, seemed unaffected by their present situation, and gurgled happily at the gambler.

He listened to the others as he worked. Geno was going on about how much money they would get for the kid. They had been paid to kill the father. The ransom would be the icing on the cake.

From what Ezra could gather, Mr. Benedict had fallen into debt to a man named Penn. Unable to pay the debt, Mr. Benedict was making a run to Evansville, to his father. Geno and the others were sent to make Benedict pay, in one way or another. They had gunned down the man and his wife and then returned to their lair where they had received a telegram from Penn, asking if they had found the baby. They then went back to retrieve the boy.

Ezra waved the toy dog in front of the child's eyes and Jack reached gaily for it. Ezra thought again of his young cousins and wondered what they were like, now that they were grown, and if they remembered him at all. For a time, Ezra had thought that he might be able to stay with the Phelps family forever.

Ezra's mind wandered and he wondered if anyone had missed him yet in Four Corners. He should have been back by now. He turned to see the three men watching him.

"So, is the kid gonna make it?" Geno asked him gruffly.

"He'd indeed be able to _'make it'_ if you allowed me to leave with him immediately," Ezra stated. "If you continue on this misguided path, I can't assure you of his continued health."

"Just as long as he makes it to Evansville," Geno said. He moved to where Ezra was sitting and towered over him. "And you'd better be damn sure nothing happens along the way, little man. You try to escape and I'll break every bone in your body. You behave yourself and deliver the package in one piece, and I might let you live."

Wonderful, Ezra thought.

"We're gonna make a mint off that boy. We'll be set for life!" Marty interjected.

"I'm gonna get me everythin' I ever wanted," Danny stated. "I'll get me a ranch and a passel of horses."

"I'm gonna be the richest man in town!" Marty said proudly. "Everyone will look up to me."

"It's gonna be so easy," Geno agreed, nodding at the words of the brothers.

"You, gentleman, are tilting at windmills," Ezra said with a

sigh.

Geno grabbed Ezra by his already sore wrist and jerked him to his feet. "It's time we got movin' again." And he dragged Ezra and the boy back to his horse. "No more foolin' around."

Jack dug his hands into Ezra's jacket again and held on. Ezra was able to get onto the horse and switch Jack to his right arm before Geno tightly tied his left hand to the saddle. At least he would have access to the gun if he needed it.

It was late in the day by the time that Vin and Buck found the Conestoga.

"Ah hell," Vin said under his breath as he dismounted and surveyed the scene: the woman and man, both dead on the ground; the horses, dead in their harness. Buck moved toward the wagon as Vin walked around it, examining the people slowly.

The man had been shot through the head, the woman had died of a stomach wound. It was an appalling sight to behold. Vin wished that Josiah had been with them to say a prayer over the two.

He moved to the front of the wagon to see what had become of the horses. It looked as if the black horse had been run to death. The sorrel's front legs were broken, but a bullet had ended its life.

"Vin," he heard Buck's tense voice cut through his thoughts. "Vin, you gotta come here."

Vin found Buck under the wagon, going through a small mound of packages. He held up a jacket. It was pale yellow, and the most frivolous and useless looking piece of clothing that the tracker had ever set eyes on.

"Ezra," Vin said under his breath. The gambler had taken a couple of days to go to town and _'take in some fine cuisine and replenish his wardrobe'_ as he put it.

"There's silk shirts, some of the other stuff he likes here, too," Buck said as he carefully folded the jacket and wrapped it back in the brown paper. "I think that's his bed roll there, and I can recognize some of the things he keeps in his saddlebags. Hell, it looks like all the stuff he keeps in his saddlebags." He gestured to the wagon. "There's a whole mess of cards thrown about in there, too."

"What's goin' on?" Vin asked.

"Ezra wouldn't have left all this here," Buck stated. "He wouldn't have just dumped it like this, that's for sure." The two men looked at the bodies on the ground, looking again carefully and hoping that they did not find another. "Did he follow them? Did he go after the killers?"

Vin didn't like this at all. It made no sense why Ezra would have left all of his belongings under the wagon.

He examined the signs and let himself take in all the information he

could.

The tracks leading to the wagon were confusing. It seemed that maybe six horses had followed the Conestoga, and three had returned the way they had come. No, Vin thought. Three came and left and returned again. A fourth horse came from the west.

He walked around slowly, noting a distinctive narrow boot print here and there. The other prints were quite large and deep set.

Stoker had said the riders were big men, hadn't he?

Buck had gathered up Ezra's belongings from beneath the wagon. He packed it all onto his own horse, then went back to locate a couple of blankets from the wagon to cover the dead. After that sad task was finished, he went back to the horses and waited for Vin.

The tracker took a long time, looking about slowly and carefully before he returned to where Buck stood with the horses. "Well, what do you think?" Buck asked.

Vin nodded toward the wagon. "Three men on horses chased down the wagon 'til the black died. They killed the man and the woman and left. Ezra come from over yonder. I'm thinkin' he saw the wagon and came to investigate. He probably come while the murderers were gone. Walked all through this area. Went into the wagon. I'm thinking they came back and found him."

"And they took him with them?" Buck asked.

Vin nodded and pointed, "Four horses went that way. One of 'em's Chaucer. One of their tracks crosses his. If Ezra wasn't with them, then he was followed."

"We'd better get moving."

Buck nodded and checked to make sure that the packages were secured, before mounting. "Think he's okay?" Buck asked, looking back to the bodies on the ground.

"I sure as hell hope so," Vin replied.

Ezra had been able to get the group to stop two more times during the approaching evening. They seemed fairly eager to keep the child healthy, at least that.

Ezra kept a close eye on Jack. The boy dozed in his arm for part of the day, but was active for the rest. Jack played with Ezra's watch and bit his buttons, tugged at his lapels, nose and ears and did his best to keep himself entertained with whatever was close to him.

When Jack became interested in something strange within Ezra's sleeve, the man distracted the child from investigating any further.

Ezra talked softly to Jack, telling him the least objectionable stories he could think of. He constantly tried to assure that boy that "Ezra will take care of you." He wished he had his deck with him. Kids always enjoyed a good card trick. The boy, for his part,

seemed totally unafraid, and unbothered by the long ride.

Finally, shortly before dark, the small group stopped.

Again, Ezra was roughly untied from the saddle and pulled to the ground. He had to keep a tight hold to keep from losing Jack.

"Come on, little man," Geno said as he dragged the gambler to a tree. Geno again fastened Ezra's left arm to a rope and tied it off on a low branch of the tree. Ezra had enough line to move about three feet, but no further.

Marty threw the saddlebags at him and Ezra set up to care for the child again. He watched the men light a fire, and once it started to blaze Ezra stated that he was going to need boiling water.

The three men stared at him and Ezra sighed, "There's a limited amount of diapers, gentlemen. They'll need to be washed so that we can continue. And the child will need supper."

They looked unsure, but complied. Ezra was untied and allowed to fill the large pot and the smaller pan at a nearby stream. He placed the big pot on the fire, and settled the saucepan in front of him. Into it, he threw carrots and a potato. He changed the child and then was allowed, under careful watch, to return to the stream to wash out the soiled diapers and clothing with the soap and bring them to the boiling pot.

At the river, only one man guarded the gambler. This was something he could handle. Ezra calculated his odds of escape, but realized that getting the child out of the situation alive would be difficult. Once trouble started, he'd be in a bind, trying to get back to the child.

He bided his time.

Cleaning diapers was not the sort of work that the gambler would have normally stooped to, but it was not unfamiliar to him. During his year at the Phelps home he'd changed and washed a mountain of diapers. He mused again about those Phelps children: Jeffrey, Michelle and Jesse. He could still see their faces clearly.

He'd taught the older children the alphabet and young Jeff was learning to read. With time, he may have had the young prodigy literate. Jeff was such a clever and good-natured boy. Shell was a pretty young girl who loved to laugh and dance and listen to stories. Little Jesse was a beautiful baby, who could have an awful temper at times.

Ezra wondered if they remembered him at all. Jesse, certainly, was too young, but Jeff and Shell were a bit older. Maybe they thought of him from time to time?

Ezra shook his head to clear the thought. Why would they have remembered him anyway?

Jack was left in the care of Danny while Ezra was at the stream. When the gambler returned, the boy flung out his hands crying, "Wah! Wah!" making the other men laugh.

Ezra was alarmed by the sound, but saw that the child seemed unharmed. Standish pulled the saucepan off the fire and carried it with him back to the tree. Before he was re-tied, they did allow Ezra to do what he could about his wrists. The right one really wasn't very bad, but a layer of skin on his left had been rubbed off. He cleaned the sore spots as well as he could and used his two remaining handkerchiefs as bandages before he was roughly bound back to the tree.

Jack crawled immediately to him when released and perched himself on Ezra's lap. The child continued to say, "Wah!"

"Shush now, child," Ezra said softly. "Ezra will take care of you."

"Wah?" the boy said, playing with the ends of the handkerchief on Ezra's free hand. He looked up and met the con man's green eyes. "Wah?"

And Ezra smiled, realizing that the boy wasn't crying, rather he was trying to say his name.

"Ezzz-rah," the gambler prompted.

"Eh-wah!" the boy returned, smiling.

"Fair enough," Ezra declared with a shrug. He drained the saucepan, then mashed some of the boiled vegetables with the spoon. That done, he dumped them into the bowl for Jack.

He carefully fed the boy. After Jack had had his fill, Ezra ate what was left, then he finished taking care of the boiling laundry, which he could just barely reach by stretching the rope taut. He set the now clean diapers out on branches near the fire for the night.

Between the dry air and the heat of the fire, they should hopefully be ready by morning.

The three men laughed uproariously as the fancily dressed man completed these chores. "We should keep him around," Danny said. "We could use a maid. He could wash our socks for us."

Geno smiled. "Yeah, maybe we'll keep him."

Ezra kept his face passive as the men spoke, knowing that this was not the time to make any comments. He sat back down beside the boy, who snuggled against him.

My, how he hated sleeping outside, and now without his bedroll, it was even worse. Ezra tried to pull his jacket around the two of them without taking it off. He looked back at their captors, who were getting settled in for the night. He hoped he could find a chance to get out of here soon, but didn't think he would be able to get out of the knots.

Now, if they had used handcuffs that would be a different story.

"He'll need a blanket," Ezra said to the men. "The child must be kept

warm or he'll certainly contract pneumonia." The three looked amongst themselves. They didn't seem to want to, but finally Danny threw a thread-bare blanket to him.

Jack giggled and held tightly to him as Ezra settled the blanket over the two of them. He wrapped his free arm around the child and hoped for the best.

Just before dark, Vin and Buck came across the place where the outlaws had stopped for the first time. Vin was glad to see the gambler's boot prints again, amongst the larger ones. There was no sign of blood or struggle, which was good.

He knew for certain that Ezra was with them now, not just following or being followed. He could find the place where Ezra had sat for a time and had done something, but Vin could not tell for certain what had happened. Then he noticed a curious thing in the dust. He squatted close to the ground to look at the small mark.

"What is it?" Buck asked.

Vin touched the depression and looked up at Buck in wonder. "A baby," he said.

"What?" Buck asked incredulously. "They've got a baby with 'em? Think it belongs to that couple?"

Vin nodded. "Could be." He glanced about and said, "We'll camp here and start again at first light."

Buck looked to Vin. "What do you think is goin' on? What are they doin' with a baby? What's Ezra doin' with 'em?"

"Dunno," Vin said. "It looks like the kid stays with Ezra though. Why do think that is?"

Buck shook his head. "You never know with Ezra," he replied.

Jack, pulling at his collar, awakened Ezra. He opened his eyes slowly, hoping that this had all be a nightmare.

"No such luck," Ezra said under his breath. He smiled at the boy who laughed at him. Ezra looked up to see that Marty was still on watch.

Jack's diaper had not fared well during the night and both of them had ended up soaked. "At least it is only _wet_," Ezra sighed at the state of his jacket. It could have been a lot worse.

He was glad that the blazer wasn't one of his favorites, but no fine fabric deserved to be treated like that. He changed the boy, put him in new clothing and tossed the dirty items into the oilskin pouch, and then into the empty pot. He wished that he had something clean to wear for himself.

Of course, it wasn't even worth thinking about because he didn't dare take off his jacket for fear of revealing the hidden derringer.

Ezra ran his hands briefly through his hair, hoping to straighten it into a somewhat presentable fashion. He sullenly realized that there

would be no chance to shave. His shaving kit was gone.

This was no way to start a morning!

Next, he went through the small food stash to find something for the boy to eat. He mixed up some of the powdered milk with water and gave it to Jack, and when he finished, he pulled out the canned fruit and after some prompting was able to get Marty to open it for him. The men would have eaten all the contents if Ezra hadn't told them that the child could fall victim to scurvy if he didn't get his proper fruit intake.

Ezra soaked some of the bread in the juice left in the can. Jack seemed more than pleased with his meal. Once the boy was finished, Ezra tore off a piece of bread and spread it with jam for himself.

He looked down at the smiling boy and thought that Jack didn't look like Cousin Jesse at all. Jack was had dark brown hair and eyes. Jesse had been fair. Jesse had always been a handful, always active and full of energy. Jack was a much milder child, content to sit quietly and play with the simplest things.

Jesse would be nearly an adult by now. Ezra figured that the boy must have grown into a fine young man, headstrong and full of promise. He hoped that Jack had the same possibilities ahead of him.

Ezra wondered again if he was missed in Four Corners. He had not given them a very firm return time, but he should have been back before nightfall. In any case, someone should have found the wagon by now, Ezra thought. If they found the wagon... they would find his belongings.

If any of the other Seven found his belongings, they'd be able to surmise who owned the items. That would get them wondering. Someone would come after him.

Ezra followed the logic and looked back the way they had come. Someone would be trailing him.

Maybe they were already coming.

He would have to let them know that he understood. He would do whatever he could to slow down this group and allow the ones who followed to catch them.

He glanced at his hand then looked back at the men. They were busy packing up their belongings. He popped the cufflink off his left wrist and drove it into the soft wood of the tree, angling it in.

Geno suddenly loomed over him and roughly untied the rope from the tree and jerked him to his feet, using the cord.

"Come on, get yer stuff and let's get outta here," Geno growled.

"There's no need for violence," Ezra declared as he threw the saddle bag over his shoulder and leaned down to pick up the boy. Jack threw his arms around his neck and held on as Ezra straightened. The

gambler didn't have time to regain his balance before Geno yanked him forward with the rope.

Ezra made three off-kilter steps before tripping into a muddy puddle.

Stars of pain flashed as he landed on his elbow, trying to keep from falling on the child. The men laughed loudly and Jack looked at him in wonder, apparently thinking that this was some sort of a game. Ezra had felt the derringer rig engage when he hit the ground, and it was only because he was tightly holding the child that the gun did not come flying into the open.

He struggled back to his feet with as much dignity as he could and mounted the horse.

Geno, still laughing, lashed him to the saddle and said, "Yeah, we should keep you around. You'll be good for a laugh if nothing else."

Ezra had to shift Jack to his left to get the pressure off his smarting arm and to work the derringer back into position. He'd landed on his 'funny-bone.' He didn't see anything funny about it.

He was covered half in mud and baby piss. He was tired and hungry and still with these giants.

Ezra looked back toward the tree where he had spent the night. He couldn't see the cuff link and wondered if he had placed it too secretively. He certainly hoped that Vin was with whomever was following. Vin would find it.

The men started on their way again, pulling Ezra and Jack along with them.

The child fell asleep as the group traveled. Ezra wondered how much longer this was going to last. He had not yet found a chance to escape with the boy and he had an awful feeling that his chances were just going to get slimmer the longer they traveled. He hoped someone was close behind.

The morning wore on. The child slept and woke and slept again with Ezra watching over him.

"This is where they spent the night," Vin said as he dismounted early in the afternoon. "They had a fire. Looks like some of 'em slept over here. Musta been Ezra over there by the tree. The kid was there, too." After a few more minutes, he added, "Looks like Ezra went down to the stream a couple times. He fell in the mud here."

"Not like Ezra to get himself into the mud," Buck commented. He always marveled at Vin's ability. Buck could follow a trail, but didn't have Vin's ability to discern what everything meant.

"They had him tied here, it looks," Vin said, touching a branch that was several feet off the ground. He could see the three-foot diameter that Ezra had been allowed to function in.

Something caught his eye and he bent down beside the tree. Just

behind a notch in the branch something shined. He fingered the item for a moment before he pulled it out and showed it to Buck.

"Now, that's gotta be Ezra's," Buck said when he saw the gold cufflink.

Vin nodded. "He knows." And he handed the piece of jewelry to the other man.

"Knows what?" Buck asked as he examined it for a moment.

"That we're followin' him," Vin replied. "We'd better get movin'. We're still a ways behind 'em."

Buck carefully placed the cufflink amongst the rest of Ezra's belongings and remounted. The two men hurried on to follow the trail.

Ezra had been trying to entertain the child. Reciting poetry over the past two days, he had gone through his entire repertoire of appropriate verse. Now he was fishing around for something new and was finding only random couplets and stanzas, nothing that really fit together.

The child didn't seem to mind. Jack seemed happy just to listen to anything that the southerner said.

Ezra had been able to get the group to stop three times already and had left his other cufflink, his tie pin, his watch fob. It probably didn't matter, he thought, he didn't need to leave something at every step, but it made him feel better in any case.

He stopped his recitations to the child when he heard Geno grumble, "Ah, shit."

The gambler looked up to see two horsemen ahead of them. For a moment his heart leaped thinking it was two of the Seven, but as he squinted at the distant images, he realized that there was no such luck.

The four waited while the two approached. As they came closer, Geno shouted, "Penn! Glad to see ya."

Penn's the loan shark, Ezra recalled, _the man who started all of this_. He shook his head as he watched Penn and the other man approach. Although the two didn't reach Geno's height, they were of an extremely generous size. _Just my luck_, Ezra thought, _more giants._

One was blond and self-assured, the other was thin, with a sly look about him.

"Geno," the blond said, tipping his head. "Danny, Marty." His eyes then turned to Ezra. "What's this?"

"That's our maid," Danny said helpfully. "We got 'im to keep the kid alive. We're gonna keep him. He can muck out the horses and do our laundry for us."

Penn looked skeptical and then his eyes fixed on the child. "I see you have the boy."

"He's ours, Penn," Geno stated.

Penn looked back at the largest man and said, "Geno, whatever gave you that idea?"

Ezra prepared himself. This looked like it could lead to a rather fierce argument. If he could only get Chaucer untied from Marty's horse, this could be his chance to escape.

But instead of fighting, Geno relented, "You're right, Penn. He's yours. You're the one who told us about the kid." He ducked his head and looked away. Apparently the huge man was afraid of Penn.

The loan shark smiled. "Don't worry, boys. We'll all get a share of the ransom." Penn again turned his attention on Ezra. "Looks like your maid is a little worse for wear."

"He's keepin' the kid in one piece," Geno told him. "Does the diaperin' and everything."

"Does it have a name?" Penn asked.

"Does it matter?" Geno replied.

Penn shrugged and said, "No."

Ezra kept quiet, realizing that the men regarded him as nothing more than an object at this point. This could turn out very badly for him.

"Does it talk?" Penn asked.

"Non-stop!" Danny responded.

Penn smirked, apparently amused at the gambler's present silence. "As long as it doesn't cause any trouble we'd might as well keep it. The kid has to be alive until its grandfather sees it, I guess. We want to make a good impression."

Ezra startled at what the man had said. "You do mean that you intend to deliver the child alive and well," Ezra drawled, and repeated, "Alive."

Penn shook his head as if he were talking to a fool. "So, it speaks. Listen, the old man delivers the money and we're out of here. After that..." he shrugged. "Can't have either of you fingering us, now can we?"

Ezra held the child tight to him. "The boy can't do anything to you. He's a baby," he said incredulously. "He'll remember nothing of this."

"I'm not a man to take chances," Penn said and then he turned to Geno. "It's a bad idea to bring this nurse of yours along, but I know I'm not going to be the one totin' that kid. Make sure he isn't around when this is over. Shall we be going?"

Ezra mulled over what he had just heard. Up until this point he felt that the two of them might have been able to make it out of this

okay. Now, it looked like that was not going to be the case. The ransom would be paid, but the hostage would never be returned. He would just be lost in the process.

Geno nodded and the group continued in the direction they had been headed. Ezra looked back as they moved on. He could just barely see his ruby ring on the ground, where he had dropped it.

He didn't like Penn. It appeared he was someone to be reckoned with. He wouldn't be as easily manipulated as Geno and the rest.

The other man, who he soon learned was named Sal, was silent and followed Penn's every command. As they continued along, Ezra looked down at Jack who stared back with his big brown eyes.

"I'm sorry, Jack," Ezra said softly, realizing that he had probably missed any chance they had had of escaping. If luck was on his side, he might have been able to take on three men, but not five, not with just the derringer.

He wondered just how far behind the others were. He had to believe they were there. Had to believe.

Jack tried to find the ring on Ezra's hand and looked annoyed to find it gone. The gambler moved the toy dog out of his jacket pocket and into the waistcoat. The baby laughed to see the head poking out of the small pocket.

TBC

2. Giant - Section 2

Buck and Vin continued picking their way along the path left by the others. The two didn't speak much. Buck would have preferred a little conversation, but Vin was tight on his task.

Wilmington leaned back in his saddle and watched the tracker. He hoped that they caught up to the killers soon. He hoped that everything was going to be fine, and that they would be able to disentangle both Ezra and that kid from whatever trouble they had found themselves in.

After about an hour, Jack started fussing again and Ezra tried to keep him quiet. He had settled the boy on the saddle in front of him because he could not hold him with the bound arm and the right arm was too sore now from the constant weight and the banged-up elbow. The boy had been babbling, running his hands through Chaucer's mane and kicking his feet gently against the saddle, but now he was just whining. The diaper was wet again and the child was most likely hungry.

"We'll need to stop," Ezra said definitively.

Marty pulled his horse to a stop and started to dismount. Penn glared at him. "Are you taking orders from him?" he asked.

Marty looked from Penn to Geno, and Geno spoke, "He's gotta check out the kid."

Penn's eyes turned on Ezra. "Why the hell do ya need to do that?"

"The child needs to be tended. You can't expect a child of this age to continue at this pace. He requires sustenance and a replacement for his diaper. The child's wet," Ezra said firmly.

"As long as it's still breathing, that's all I care about." Penn nodded to the others to keep them moving, but Ezra had already swung himself out of the saddle with the boy in his arm. He knew he was pressing his luck, but he had to slow them down so that the others could catch up, and he had to look after the kid.

"We'll stop now," Ezra drawled.

Marty had not moved his horse. He looked back at the southerner whose arm was still tied to the saddle.

"Keep moving, boys," Penn said.

"He's not ready to go," Marty said timidly. "He's gotta get back on his horse."

"Drag him if ya have to," Penn said offhand.

Marty looked uncertain, but slowly started to walk his horse forward. Chaucer balked, digging in his hooves and refusing to move. The horse strained as its halter was pulled forward by the other horse.

"Steady," Ezra said softly, holding his ground, "Good boy, steady." And then he spoke louder. "If you drag me, you risk losing the boy. Certainly that wouldn't be acceptable."

Marty continued urging his horse forward. Chaucer was forced to take several halting steps, hauling Ezra along with him. Ezra was tripped up and had to hang on to the saddle horn to keep upright, with the boy clinging to his neck. The horse rolled his eyes back to his owner apologetically.

"Easy, old friend," Ezra said between his teeth as he regained his footing. The horse lurched onward again and Ezra stumbled forward. He could not get a good grip on the saddle horn due to his bound hand, and the other arm was occupied with keeping Jack out of harm's way. If this kept up, he would be in big trouble. He stumbled forward, keeping up with the moving horse.

"Stop," Geno said, "We can't damage the goods before we get our hands on the money."

The blond man glared at Ezra, but apparently agreed with Geno. "Get the kid fixed up and let's get the hell out of here."

Marty seemed relieved and dismounted so that he could untie Ezra from the saddle, leaving the rope on his arm. The gambler pulled his hand, trailing the cord, to himself. The handkerchief showed signs of blood seeping through. The boy huddled against Standish as he pulled down the saddlebags and found a place to sit down.

The other men were stretching and milling about. Ezra changed the

child and fed him some of the bread and jam. The boy smiled and clapped his hands.

"How can one be so oblivious?" Ezra asked quietly. Jack seemed perfectly happy in all of this, not even aware of the danger that they were in. Such a young child; he should escape from this without any emotional scars, Ezra hoped. The gambler had enough bad memories of his own childhood; he wouldn't wish them on anyone.

He remembered the last time he had seen his young cousins. He'd prepared them for their father's wedding, sent them off to the church, then had settled in to wait for their return. He'd been extremely surprised by the arrival of his mother shortly afterward. He hadn't even known that Maude had been invited to the celebration.

For a moment he'd been jubilant, thinking that she'd come to take him back with her, but after one look, he'd realized that it was not to be so. She had the most professional poker face, but Ezra had learned to recognize that certain look. She had been taking him off to another relative.

"You are no longer needed or wanted now that my darlin' sister has been replaced. Don't act like such a child, Ezra. You should know by now that partings are to be expected in our business. You know better than to become attached to anyone, Ezra. After that discussion we had regarding Mrs. Greer, I would have thought you could handle this. Have you forgotten everything that I have taught you? I'll send for you as soon as I can, but I can't have you with me at the moment."

He had been shuttled off to the meeting hall, where the wedding reception was taking place and had been left in someone's wagon until it was time to go. He'd be sent to the train station when it was all over. Ezra had watched as his young cousins and uncle exited with the new Mrs. Phelps.

They'd looked so happy together, he'd thought, like a real family.

Ezra glanced reluctantly at his watch and then sighed. With a quiet movement, he placed it behind a knob on a stump. His elbow and right wrist didn't hurt so badly now, but his left arm was another story. He must have wrenched it in that poor display. The wrist didn't seem to be bleeding too badly, but it certainly hurt. He moved his fingers slowly, praying that he hadn't caused any damage to his hand.

He wished that they had removed the rope so that he could wash the sores. Between the blood, baby urine, baby food and mud, his jacket was in horrible condition. But he was still in one piece and, aside from his wrist, he was in fairly good shape. He glanced to half-hidden watch, and hoped the others were close.

"Time's up, pretty boy," Geno said. He made a move to pull Ezra upright, but the gambler beat him to it and stood with the boy and the saddlebag.

Ezra kept his head down as he headed back to the horse. Marty met him and tied the rope again to the saddle horn. He was about to swing himself back up when Penn came up behind him.

"You try to boss me around again, little man, and I'll have Sal hold the kid while I drag you to your death," Penn growled. "Do you understand me?"

"You're perfectly clear," Ezra replied as he watched Penn's cool expression. He had no doubts that he'd do exactly as he stated.

Vin stared at the ground, stating, "We'll catch 'em by mid day, I reckon." He dismounted and walked a short distance before he squatted down near the ground and retrieved something.

"I know, Ezra," Vin said as he clutched the item.

Buck waited until Vin handed him a watch. Buck sighed and carefully secured the item with the rest of Ezra's possessions. They had been having a veritable Ezra treasure hunt.

"If we don't find him soon, there's ain't gonna be nothin' left of him," Buck quipped.

Vin winced as he mounted his horse. "Don't say that again, okay, Buck?"

Buck shook his head realizing how bad his last statement sounded. "I don't understand why he keeps leaving stuff. I mean, we already got the message that it's him."

Vin shrugged. "He just wants us to know that he's okay. Tellin' us he knows we're gonna to help him. He's asking us to come get him."

Buck nodded. "Let's go then."

They had been traveling for several hours when Ezra looked over his shoulder. He smiled with recognition.

"We will need to stop," Ezra drawled.

Penn and the rest of them turned toward him. Penn looked incredulous. "You're kidding," he said.

"The child requires that we pause," Ezra said defiantly. He had seen two horsemen in the distance. There was no doubt that it was Buck and Vin. He had to slow this group down again.

"You're just looking for trouble, aren't you?" Penn asked.

"I'm afraid, it's trouble that looks for me," Ezra replied. Marty had stopped his horse, so Ezra once again swung himself down.

Penn looked at him levelly. "Sal, take the kid. Geno, why don't you take Marty's horse this time."

"Hold up," Vin said and pulled his spyglass from his pocket. "It's them. And shit, Stoker wasn't kiddin'. Those are big guys."

"Do you see Ezra?" Buck asked.

"Yeah. Got off his horse. Got that kid with him." Vin strained to make out what was going on across the distance. "Someone's taking the

kid from him." Vin suddenly dropped the spyglass into his pocket and spurred his horse into a full gallop, growling, "Son of a bitch!"

Buck took off after him. "What?" Buck shouted after Vin, trying to catch up to the fleeing horseman in front of him. "What's happening?"

Vin had pulled his mare's leg and was firing ahead of him. "Damn them," he shouted. He turned so that Buck could hear him. "They're gonna drag 'im."

Buck could see two horses moving ahead of him. Chaucer was tied behind another horse, being pulled along at a fairly good pace and obviously against his will. The rider on the lead horse was a huge man, looking over his shoulder and laughing.

Buck could not see Ezra. He pulled out his pistol and started firing, too. Vin had seen some sort of a ruckus around the horses at their last stop. He figured this wasn't the first time this had happened to Ezra.

Buck watched as the five men pulled their weapons and, mercifully, the two horses came to a halt.

Wilmington heard the blond one shout, "You'd better stop or I'll kill 'im." The man pointed his pistol to the far side of Chaucer, apparently to where Ezra was.

Vin and Buck pulled to a stop, weapons ready. They could see Ezra's hand still tied to the saddle horn, and his legs beneath, but apparently the gambler was hunched over and hidden by the body of his horse.

"That's better," the man shouted again.

There were five big men: the blond, two dark haired men that were alike enough to be brothers, a thin man and a giant that must have stood seven feet tall. They stood with their guns drawn and ready. For a few moments, no one moved.

Suddenly, Vin and Buck saw Ezra's head pop up over his saddle and look in their direction. He grinned.

Thank God, Buck thought.

One of the men untied Ezra, none too gently, and pulled the gambler to one side. Ezra looked scuffed and dusty "but in one piece." Vin and Buck watched as the huge man and the blond talked down to Ezra, and Ezra glared defiantly. Finally, after several minutes, Ezra turned away from the men and headed toward the two.

"They're letting him go!" Buck said hopefully.

Vin watched as Ezra walked toward them. He was limping and there was something wrong about his left arm. The two men urged their horses closer until Ezra held up his hand to stop them, continuing to close the distance between them on foot.

Finally, while he was still some distance from them, one of the men

behind him whistled and Ezra came to a halt. He was far enough from the two of them that he would have to shout, and close enough to the others that they could easily hear him.

The usually-neat gambler was a mess. His jacket was filthy, his hair was disheveled, his face unshaved, his pants ripped, his boots were terribly scuffed. His cuffs hung down below his hands, and the left was stained with blood.

"Good evening, gentleman," Ezra said loudly. "May I say I'm elated to see you?"

"Are you okay, Ezra?" Buck asked anxiously.

"Due to your impeccable timing, I'm remarkably unscathed. I'd like to thank you emphatically."

"What's goin' on?" Vin asked, "Are they lettin' ya go?"

"Unfortunately, I'm only a messenger at this point," Ezra said with a smile. "My traveling companions have found your arrival fortuitous as well. They require you to perform a service for them."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"There's a man, William Benedict, in Evansville. It's the next town. These men have Mr. Benedict's grandchild and would be more than happy to accept \$5,000 from him."

"Ransom?" Buck called back.

Ezra smiled and said distinctly, "The child will remain safe until the point when the money is delivered. It's important that you understand that exactly."

Vin watched Ezra carefully. There was something odd about the way he was standing. It was obvious that his left arm was giving him some trouble, wrenched by the dragging. The tracker would have expected him to be hanging onto the left arm with his right, except he was doing the opposite. The gambler held his right arm with his left, with one finger extended over his forearm. Vin stared at Ezra's arm for a moment and then met his eyes. The two men exchanged knowing looks over the distance.

Ezra continued talking, "_They_ request that you go to town and extract this money from Mr. Benedict and return here at 8:00 tomorrow morning. That is _their_ request."

The man behind Ezra whistled again and Ezra smiled tiredly. "I'm afraid they want me to return. I'll be dispatched early if I don't comply. I'll be ready, whatever the outcome." He turned and started limping back toward the other men.

"Good luck, Ez," Buck said, not knowing what else to say.

"Nothing but, Mr. Wilmington," Ezra said, not turning back toward him.

"We'll take care of it," Vin promised.

"I know you shall, Mr. Tanner," Ezra replied, as he continued on his way. The two horsemen remained where they were until Ezra returned to the company of the other men. Vin frowned, as he saw a man reach for the gambler's right arm, but Ezra offered him his left and that arm was immediately tied to the end of a rope.

Vin knew that that arm was giving him pain, but he understood why Ezra needed his right arm free.

"He sure looks small next to those guys," Buck said glumly.

Vin nodded. He had never really thought about Ezra as being small in stature, but he looked so tiny amongst those huge men.

"Josiah'd look tiny 'longside that big 'un," Vin commented. They watched as Ezra took the child back from the thinnest of the group. The baby immediately clung to their friend, and tried to climb into his filthy jacket. The man who held the rope then tugged Ezra and the child out of sight and into a copse of trees.

"What now?" Buck said.

"Head toward Evansville," Vin replied.

Buck furrowed his brow, "Hell, Vin, there's no way that I'm gonna leave Ezra here with them. They don't need him anymore if they've been keeping him just to deliver that message. We gotta keep an eye on him."

"We'll head **_toward_** Evansville," Vin explained. "They're expectin' to see us go. We'll do some scoutin' and find a good place to dig in."

"But what about the ransom?"

"Ezra don't want us to go get it. They ain't gonna to deliver the babe livin', so I guess the ransom don't matter a fig. They're gonna kill Ezra too once this is done. He's got his pea-shooter still, and he's ready for whatever we come up with."

Buck looked shocked. "When'd he say that?"

Vin smiled and returned, "You weren't paying attention."

The two lawmen circled wide around the trees on the way to Evansville, and then backtracked, following a track that would keep them out of view.

After carefully scouting the area, Vin decided that the best place to get into position was the location where they had started, so they slowly made their way back. They settled in, as close as they could without being seen.

It had been several hours since they had first caught up with Ezra and the others, and they had not seen them again since they had disappeared into the trees. The two peacekeepers had been talking, trying to figure out a plan on how to free their friend and the child, but had so far come up with nothing that would work.

It was nearly nightfall when they heard riders heading toward them. They looked up to see four horsemen. "Shit, more of them?" Buck asked, looking to Vin.

Vin, looking through his spyglass, smiled. "Nope. More of us."

Buck couldn't have been happier to see Chris, JD, Nathan and Josiah appear out of the distance. Vin and Buck went out to meet them, keeping low to the ground to stay out of sight.

"You led us on quite a chase," Josiah said as he approached.

"We weren't the ones that planned it," Vin returned.

Chris nodded. "I got to thinkin' about that wagon. Figured we'd join you to check it out."

"Is Ezra with you?" JD asked quickly. "He never showed up in town."

"Not yet," Buck replied. Vin and Buck told them what they knew and the others listened seriously.

"Those guys sound like a bunch of bullies," JD declared.

"Dangerous ones," Vin added.

"We'd better get Ezra out of there as soon as possible," Nathan said. "Doesn't sound like they're treating him very well."

"What we need, brothers," Josiah rumbled, "Is a plan."

Chris nodded. "They're expecting a ransom. Let's get it to them"

"You want one of us to ride into town and find this Mr. Benedict?" JD asked.

"Nah," Chris said, "If they are not planning to come through with they're part of the bargain, I see no reason to come through with ours. We outnumber them. There're only five of them and six of us."

"Seven," Buck corrected. "Ezra is armed still. He'll be in this, too."

"That's right," Chris accepted, "Seven."

Ezra changed and fed the boy, using only his right hand, as his left was tied too tightly and hurt too badly to help anyway. He could still move the hand, at least that. He hoped there was no permanent damage. And now his right knee felt like hell. He had twisted it trying to keep out from under Chaucer's feet during his last act of stupidity.

He hadn't done a very good job of this, he knew. His only hope now was that someone would rescue the child and himself.

He looked out through the trees, wondering where Buck and Vin were. It felt better just knowing that they were nearby. They would be the

ones to perform the rescue.

Jack burbled at him, saying "Eh-wah!" over and over again. The boy crawled slowly around him, content to stay nearby and away from the other men.

Ezra wished he could do more for the child, wished he could get him out of here. He hadn't been able to do much of anything since this whole fiasco started. He was at the mercy of these giants, and could do nothing about it.

He saw Geno and Penn approach him and he sat the boy behind him.

"Tell me about those friends of yours," Penn said. "Will they do what I want 'em to?"

"They'll do as I've said," Ezra replied.

"They won't take the money for themselves, will they?" Penn asked. Ezra glared at them, and Penn continued, "Because you don't look like the most trustworthy sort, and if they are friends of yours, it makes me wonder."

"They'd better come back," Geno growled. "If they don't, I'm gonna break you apart."

"I'm sure that they shall," Ezra replied, "And thus deprive you of that delight."

Without warning Geno slammed his fist into Ezra's nose. The gambler curled up in pain as the others laughed. The world around him seemed to tip and sway as Ezra fought to overcome the stabbing pain that filled his head. He could still hear Geno and Penn laughing as they walked away. Slowly the world came back into order.

Why the hell did they do that? Ezra thought. Apparently there had been no reason for that latest attack on him.

Ezra shook his head, trying to clear his mind. He dropped a hand from his face, glad to find only a little blood. His nose was already starting to swell; his eyes would probably follow. _Damn._

Buck and Vin better get here soon. He wouldn't be able to protect the child for much longer if this kept up.

Jack crawled around him and found his way into Ezra's lap as he cautiously felt his nose. It didn't seem to be broken. No blood, just pain. Jack looked puzzled and then laughed at him.

"So you think I am making funny faces for your benefit?" Ezra said to the boy who beamed back at him. Ezra just hoped to God that the child remembered none of this.

Night fell and the moon rose. The six waited for time to pass, sufficient time for someone to ride to Evansville and return. They could not pull this off unless they made it look good. They listened to the activity within the trees. The men were laughing for a while, but after that all was quiet.

Finally, at Chris' command, Vin and Buck mounted and headed toward the outlaws.

"This had better work," Buck said, holding a saddlebag in front of him. It looked as if it might hold a ransom.

"We just gotta get them out into the open," Vin said. He did not turn his head but he knew that Nathan, Josiah, JD and Chris were following on foot, keeping close to cover and hidden in the night. "Our friends will take care of the rest."

Suddenly a voice called out from within the trees, "Who the hell is out there?"

"We've got the money!" Buck shouted. "All of it."

"You're early," the voice returned. They heard the distinctive sound of a gun being cocked from somewhere within the hiding place.

"The law's getting riled up in town. Benedict wanted us to get the money to you now so he could get his kid," Buck continued. "He's afraid what'd happen if the law found you first."

There was silence from within the trees and then movement. Three men emerged, the thin one and the two brothers. They were armed and ready.

One of the brothers said, "Let's see it."

Buck held up the bag and the thin man approached as if to take it from him. "We want to see your hostages," Buck said, holding it back.

The brother spoke again, "You'll get the kid soon enough. We're keepin' the other one." And the three men laughed.

Vin glowered at them. "You bring out both of them or you ain't seein' any of this money."

The other brother said, "You don't understand, do you? We got the upper hand here. We got the whole thing under control. We take what we want." With that he leveled his revolver at Vin.

The man fired, as Vin pulled sharply on Peso's reins, twisting out of the way. The man was cut down by a bullet from Josiah.

"Ah hell," Buck thought. It wasn't supposed to work this way.

Ezra moved the boy behind him when he heard the horses' approach. He heard Buck and Vin, and then watched as Danny, Marty and Sal went out to meet them.

At the first sound of gunfire, Penn stood, panicked, which quickly turned to rage. He could hear his own men screaming as they were shot down. He turned on his captives and lifted his pistol to Ezra.

The disheveled gambler raised his hand, as if to ward off the shot, and a gun magically appeared in his hand. Penn's last emotion was one of utter surprise as a bullet from the derringer found its mark.

Geno turned, and the second shot exploded into his shoulder instead of his heart. Ezra dropped the now empty weapon as Geno barreled toward him. The shot hadn't even slow him down. Ezra had one last chance. He picked up a hand-sized stone and threw it with all his might at the approaching menace.

The man never even saw the projectile. It hit his head with the sound of a ripe melon being thumped and the huge man staggered, fell to his knees and then tipped face-first to the dirt.

Ezra panting, grabbed the child. He had heard several shots around him, but it was suddenly quiet. A figure came crashing through the trees and Ezra turned to face whatever it was.

He smiled, and allowed himself to finally feel relief. "Mr. Larabee, I didn't expect you to join the festivities," he drawled.

Larabee looked at the two dead men. "That all of 'em?" he asked.

"It is if you've taken care of the other three," Ezra responded. He watched as the rest of the group entered the area.

Chris shook his head as he re-holstered his gun. "Damn, Ezra, you look like hell."

"I'm glad to only look like hell and not be there," Ezra replied.

The Seven, plus one, sat around a campfire while Nathan tended to Ezra's wrists. Ezra had filled them in on the facts he felt were necessary regarding the recent events.

"Ow, that hurts," he muttered as Nathan attempted to apply a balm to the open sores. "You do this only to aggravate me."

"Would you keep still," Nathan grumbled. "That kid is better behaved than you are."

The boy was currently sitting on Chris' lap, gurgling and laughing. "Cute kid," the gunslinger said, remembering another time and place.

"Your knee should be okay, just a bit sore for a few days. Keep off it, okay? You've strained your wrist and shoulder pretty bad. I'm going to want this arm in a sling. It doesn't look like you've done any serious damage, though. These sores should heal up okay if you do like I tell you." The healer gave the gambler a knowing glance as he worked on bandaging his wrists.

Nathan went on, "Your nose and eyes are going to get more swollen. You're not gonna be very pretty for a day or two. Other than that, you're gonna be just fine."

Ezra sighed. "I'm afraid that I shall not be fine until I'm able to get out of these clothes. They're in a most wretched state."

Buck laughed. "Not a problem Ez, we got your stuff. All of it."

"Stuff?" Ezra asked and then he brightened. "Do you have my new jacket?"

Buck shook his head and moved to his saddle and supplies. He came back with something wrapped in brown paper. He started to hand it to Ezra but the gambler refused. "Look at my hands, Mr. Wilmington, I can't possibly touch it. Would you please...?"

Buck dutifully unwrapped the pale yellow jacket and held it up before Ezra, who just smiled at the sight.

"It sure is a pretty one," JD said.

"I'd almost forgotten it existed," Ezra said thoughtfully. "Now if you'd be so kind as return it to its packaging, Mr. Wilmington, I'd be grateful." Ezra leaned back against a fallen tree and looked very tired.

"If you want to get cleaned up, I can heat up some water for ya, Ezra," JD said helpfully.

"In a moment," Ezra said and closed his eyes. "You should put some water on to boil in any case. I'll need to take care of the diapers again. I'm almost out." A second later, he was asleep.

"Eh-wah!" Jack said as he bounced on Chris' knee.

Chris looked to the others and said, "I don't know why he keeps saying that."

"Can any of you imagine Ezra cleaning diapers?" Nathan said with a laugh.

"I believe our brother Ezra is capable of almost anything," Josiah said, as he picked up a blanket and headed toward the sleeping man. The sound of approaching horses, stopping his action.

Chris handed the child to Nathan and stood to see what was coming. The five men drew their weapons and tensely waited.

A small group of men descended upon them. "We're the law from Evansville!" a man shouted, his rifle aimed at them.

"We're the law from Four Corners!" Chris shouted back.

The two groups didn't move for several seconds and then they finally relaxed and approached each other.

"We heard about the killings near Four Corners," one of the men said. "This man's son and daughter-in-law were the ones murdered. His grandson is missing. What do you know about it?"

Chris looked to the older man and said, "I take it you are William Benedict?"

The stately looking man stepped forward and spoke in a low English accent, "Yes, sir, I am. Do you bring word of my grandson? Have you found the men who killed my son and his wife?" His voice broke as he said, "Please tell me that the child is safe."

Chris nodded. "The men who did it are dead. We'll show you the bodies if you want. As for the child..." Chris motioned to Nathan who came forward with the boy.

The old man started to cry as he reached for the baby. The child smiled sweetly at the old man and let himself to be handed over. "Oh, dear sweet child. When I heard about Jack and Violet, I almost lost hope. What happened? How did he get here?"

Chris let Vin and Buck take over that part of the conversation as he headed back to the fire, to Ezra. He squatted down beside the exhausted conman. He smiled to see a toy dog peeking out of Ezra's waistcoat pocket, and then he shook Ezra gently.

The man came suddenly awake, going for his derringer, Colt and Remington in quick succession, and finding none in place, swung.

Chris was barely able to duck out of the way, grabbing Ezra's flying fist before he had a chance to do it again. "Ezra, you'd be funny if you weren't so dangerous."

Ezra shook his head and muttered, "I'm pleased that I amuse you so."

"Come on." Chris stood and offered Ezra his hand. Ezra looked puzzled and Chris explained, "The kid's grandfather is here."

Ezra allowed Chris to help him to his feet and then followed him, limping slowly, to where the men were gathered around the elderly gentleman with the child.

"Yeah, that's the guy there," Buck said as Ezra approached.

"Mr. Standish," Benedict said, extending a hand, "How can I ever thank you for saving my grandchild's life?"

Ezra shook the man's hand, saying, "Truly sir, I only kept an eye on him during our dual incarceration."

The old man looked between the pristine child and the tattered, bruised, gambler and found it hard to believe that they had just come from the same place. The boy was reaching toward the conman.

Benedict continued, "I would like to bring this child home and out of this situation immediately."

"That would be an excellent idea," Ezra drawled tiredly. "That was my hope from the beginnin'. Will you be returning to Evansville?"

Benedict frowned. "I can't stay here any longer. This country is far too violent, too dangerous. I'm returning to England as soon as possible. This child can't be reared here." He looked at his grandson who continued to reach toward the gambler. "I want to thank you again."

"It's not necessary," Ezra replied. "Your grandson is a delight and was never the slightest amount of trouble. It was a pleasure to have

made his acquaintance."

The old man nodded and said to the child, "Well, Lemuel, it's time that we went home."

"Lemuel?" Ezra said his jaw dropping slightly. "I, I was calling him Jack, like his father."

The old man smiled. "No, Lemuel was named for Jack's commander in the Union Army. And my son was named for a dear friend of mine in London. We really don't have 'family names' in my family."

"Oh," Ezra responded with uncharacteristic brevity.

The man stood there for a moment more, with the child in his arms, then turned. He handed the little boy to one of the Evansville Lawmen so that he could mount his horse and the child was returned to him. Josiah and JD handed the rest of the child's belongings to one of the other men.

The child said "Eh-wah!" again as he looked back at them.

Ezra felt Chris' hand on his shoulder as the men turned their horses.

"Again," Benedict said, "I thank you."

"No need," Ezra said under his breath. He watched as the horses started to move away and then suddenly started forward. "Wait!" he shouted and lamely followed the horses. "Wait!" Benedict turned as Ezra caught up to him. "I almost forgot." The gambler reached into this pocket and pulled out a package wrapped in a handkerchief. Benedict took it and shifted it to his pocket. He shook the gambler's hand again before taking off into the darkness.

Chris and the others caught up to where Ezra was standing. "What was that?" Buck asked.

Ezra continued to watch where the child had disappeared. "Just something to remember."

The old man waited impatiently in his home. He heard voices outside and he stood excitedly. Within seconds his three grandchildren bolted through the door and were in his arms.

"Grandfather!" they said as one.

"My dears, how you have grown! Just look at you!" There were tears in his eyes as he held his grandchildren for the first time in years. The youngest, Nora, had been just a baby then and she looked at him shyly now. The middle child, Beatrice, had been barely talking, and now she was babbling like a brook. The eldest, an always cheerful boy, tugged at his jacket as he hugged him.

The children talked about their trip, telling him all about the thousand little things that had gone on in their lives. It had been too long since he had last seen them, too terribly long. The old man listened lovingly to every word, and finally the eldest said, "Grandfather, I want to see the cowboy things."

The old man smiled. "The cowboy things, is it? Do you remember where they are?"

The boy laughed and ran ahead to the old man's study, followed closely by his sisters. "There!" the boy said, pointing at a glass case on his grandfather's desk.

The three children crowded around and peered through the glass. "Is that you, grandfather?" asked Bea, pointing at the man with the western hat in a sepia photograph.

"My little dove, how old do you think I am?"

"Ancient!" said the eldest. "Father says you had a dinosaur for a pet."

"Peter, your father is a very amusing man," the old man said and then pointed to the picture. "That man is ****_my_**** father, Jack Benedict. That's my mother, Violet, and... the baby... is me."

The three children giggled and Peter said, "You were never a baby, grandfather!"

"Is that what your father says?" Lemuel asked with a dry laugh.

"No, I said it!" Peter replied defiantly.

"You are just as bad as your father," Lemuel chuckled.

He was proud of his son. He had grown to be a marvelously poised man. Lemuel had missed his son so much during these past years. When the man had gone off to war, Lemuel had suffered terribly. When he came back wounded, his heart broke, but he was overjoyed that his son had come home at all. It wasn't safe to keep the children in London during the war, so the family had been spirited into the country.

They had begged Lemuel to come as well, but the old man saw no point to it. He had lived through so much in his life, and never backed down from anything. He wouldn't back down from this.

"Is that your father's watch?" Bea said, who was just learning to read. "Jack G. Benedict?"

"Yes it is, and that's my mother's comb," Lemuel said with a sad smile. "These are the only things that I have of theirs." He knew he could sugar coat the story, but these children had lived through a world war. There was no need to hide anything from them. "They were killed by very bad men shortly after that picture was taken and I was kidnapped."

"Really?" Bea squealed.

"Yes, I was held for two days and was in great danger," Lemuel said simply.

"E.P.S..." Nora said, pointing at the monogrammed silk handkerchief that was also contained in the glass case. "What does E .P.S. spell?"

"That belonged to the man that saved my life. He took care of me during the time that I was captured. He saw to it that no harm every came to me and that I was safely delivered to my grandfather."

Bea smiled and said, "What was he like?"

"Oh my Bea, I was just a little baby. Sometimes I think I remember things. It seems to me that he had a most wonderful voice. I was never afraid while I was with him. And he was a huge man, a giant. He towered over all the others."

"Grandfather, what does E.P.S. mean?" Nora asked again impatiently.

"It's for his initials. I never received a clear answer regarding the 'P', but the E.S. stands for Ezra Standish."

"Ezra?" the three children cried.

"Like father?" Bea added.

"Exactly," their grandfather answered.

THE END

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file.